

DEFINING MACROBIOTIC PRINCIPLES

The desire to create a “standard” definition of macrobiotic practice has emerged within our community on a regular basis. In my experience alone I have been part of many intense and in-depth discussions at teacher’s gatherings and congresses in both Europe and America. Most often there has been an agreed conclusion. These decisions are usually either so general that they could be used to describe almost any progressive natural health movement or are so steeped in past dogma that they are incomprehensible to anyone who is not already familiar with macrobiotics.

One reason for this may be that these statements of shared belief start with the intention to please everyone and in doing so often lack clarity of vision or insight that challenge past doctrine or reframe collective experience. This tendency actually serves to cripple the growth and vitality of macrobiotics as a vital social force.

The expression of our collective beliefs must acknowledge modern concerns while maintaining the most important macrobiotic principles. When we begin to define ourselves by the past we neglect the opportunities of the future. If our objective is to contribute to the creation of ***“One Peaceful World”*** we need to have a clear understanding of where we are in the present as well as an inspiring vision of the future.

TOWARD DEFINING WHAT WE BELIEVE

When set out to define any set of ideas it is often helpful to reduce them to their simplest form and avoid specialized terminology. This allows for clarity regarding the relative worth of the concepts being studied. My purpose here is to discover if there are any areas where our collective experience and study have proven to contradict previous beliefs as well as define areas where our collective action may not be congruent with our core values.

WHAT ARE THE FOUNDATIONS OF MACROBIOTIC THINKING?

- Macrobiotics is an ecological philosophy that aims to understand the laws of nature and the human relationship to those laws.
- We believe that everything in nature is connected, there is no us or them, there is no “other”.

- We believe that there is an order to natural process - we believe in natural law.
- We believe that it is possible for humankind to perceive the order of nature through study, observation and experience.
- We believe that if we understand this order we can align our thoughts and actions with it and live a more vibrant, fulfilling and healthy life.
- Part of this process of alignment is the ability to change and adapt to new realities.

HOW DO OUR BELIEFS TRANSLATE INTO DAILY LIFE?

- Macrobiotic teaching places great value on maximising individual and social health as an essential part of personal growth.
- The process of creating and maintaining health is a personal laboratory for understanding natural law through physical experience and the development of a visceral understanding of the world around us.
- We realize that creation of health includes a constellation of influences including (but not limited to) physical activity, emotional stability, intellectual curiosity, fulfilling relationships, a spirituality grounded on respect for life as well as good nutrition.
- Macrobiotics has always had a special focus on food choice and preparation. It is a fundamental part of the process of creating health. The food we eat, along with air and water, are the most intimate connection between our biological being and the environment.
- We acknowledge the fact that food choices have implications that effect the environment, social health, economic justice and a wide range of ethical issues as well as individual health.
- Making simple food choices is a way of reforming social attitudes about health as well as a daily reminder of our relationship with nature.
- Understanding our connection with nature, we make every attempt to live with gratitude and without the undue waste of resources.
- We always support the natural rather than the synthetic and chemical solution to foods, goods and services.
- The outcome of these actions lead to a greater commensal relationship to nature and a rejection of the parasitic values of modern society.

MACROBIOTICS AS A SOCIAL INFLUENCE

- The stated goal of the last generation of macrobiotic teachers was to work toward the creation of One Peaceful World.
- The challenge of any social movement is to stay true to its stated objectives and maintaining its founding principles while adapting to changes in the cultural environment.
- Contemporary macrobiotic practitioners find themselves in a unique position. The science of nutrition is steadily moving toward the dietary conclusions we have promoted for decades. The macrobiotic movement has played an important social role in this development.
- While public interest in and knowledge of nutrition has increased greatly over the past 20 years, interest in macrobiotics has diminished.
- The macrobiotic skill set includes abilities as such as cooking, home food processing, understanding seasonal eating, home remedies, the healing power of foods and a variety of useful techniques from ancient wisdom traditions. These skills can be important contributions to those who are changing their food habits in response to health concerns, environmental issues and ethical concerns.
- It is clear that one of the most certain contributions to the creation of One Peaceful World is changing the way our food is grown, processed, distributed and retailed. The modern food chain is a series of commercial, not biological relationships. Our fundamental beliefs should give us unique credibility on these issues, it has not.
- There is a case to be made that macrobiotics is not seen as unique in any way and simply blends in with other forms of “plant-based” nutrition.
- It may be that the tendency to cloak our thinking in a series of esoteric principles, the over-emphasis on individual “special needs” and lack of any dietary ethic creates confusion and lack of clarity.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ECOLOGICAL FOOD ETHIC?

Ethical issues are increasingly part of the debate on food quality. These ethical considerations include, but are not limited to:

- The direct impact of specific foods which contribute to disease.
- The impact of chemicals in farming on health and the environment.
- The impact on small farms in poor countries by multi-nationals.

- Food slavery.
- International Food Security.
- The potential damage of GMO crops to health and environment.
- The spread of animal disease to humans (zoonosis).
- The use of land to grow food for animals rather than humans.
- The rapid depletion of fish stocks.
- The killing of sentient animals as a food source.

All of these issues are part of the evolving understanding of human nutrition and will become more dominant in the future. The question is if the macrobiotic community will be part of that evolution or not.

When we look at the above issues of nutritional ethics it is clear that the production and consumption of all animal foods produce the biggest negative influence. What holds us back from making a clear stand?

Perhaps a more important question for the macrobiotic teaching community is if our practice is coherent with the principles stated above. If macrobiotics is really about raising our consciousness, (or using Ohsawa's term, Judgement) why would we not promote the highest standard of practice toward that goal. In Kushi's Spiritual Development Seminars he taught that the most refined state of consciousness we attained was by avoiding all animal food. In Zen Macrobiotics, Ohsawa suggested that eating animal sourced foods were only used when there was no hurry to advance to the highest levels of judgement.

SOME MACROBIOTIC CONCERNS

Macrobiotic practitioners have stated several concerns or objections about supporting an animal free approach to macrobiotics. I have addressed some of these below. I also acknowledge that there are many issues that would generally find group agreement but I have not addressed them here.

Nutrition: There is a general agreement that the modern diet, heavily dependent on animal fats, sugar, chemical additives and trans fats is killing us. Those populations that consume this diet consistently present the highest rates of NCD's. This has been shown in epidemiological studies since the 1950's and confirmed consistently by numerous studies.^{1,2,3,4}

¹ Chowdhury R, Warnakula S, Kunutsor S, et al. Association of dietary, circulating, and supplement fatty acids with coronary risk. *Ann Intern Med* 2014; 160(6):398-406.

The hundreds of studies that show the same relationship between the modern diet, particularly animal products and NCD's is over whelming. Even though we use a different and (I feel) more comprehensive method to reach the same results should not dissuade us from using this information.

Tradition: There are two parts to the macrobiotic resistance to the avoidance of all animal products regarding traditions. The first is anthropological and the second is the reference to macrobiotic culture.

When we reflect on food traditions from around the world we surely know that they were a direct response to environmental conditions such as soil, water, altitude, and weather as well as developed technologies. This is fundamental to the ecological macrobiotic world-view. Traditions were always a question of food availability, environment and cultural development. Stories of Maasai warriors, people living in deep jungles or native Inuit people are interesting but they are anomalies. The same is true of our real or imagined ancestors following the "traditional diet".

Regarding macrobiotic culture, it is important to use the same thinking that applies to any cultural group – leaders are mimicked. The fact that Michio was fond of fish is no more important than the fact that he smoked. The fact that Ohsawa included animal quality foods in 5 out of his 10 diets is as irrelevant as his views of the role of women. Respecting the teachings of these men and the courage of their commitment to a better world does not mean wholesale acceptance of everything that came out of their mouth (or went into it).

The physical and social environment we live in has changed dramatically in the last century, even in the past 50 years and will keep on changing. It is the reality of the present not the past, that we must make balance with. It is the present that produces the challenges to our health. Tradition is interesting and often instructive but not a sensible guideline for the future.

The Curious Story of The Fish: One of the most interesting theories put forward by Ohsawa was his view of evolution. His observations on the

² Oh K, Hu FB, Manson JE, Stampfer MJ, Willett WC. Dietary fat intake and risk of coronary heart disease in women: 20 years of follow-up of the Nurses' Health Study. *Am J Epidemiol* 2005;161:672-9.

³ Laaksonen DE, Nyyssonen K, Niskanen L, Rissanen TH, Salonen JT. Prediction of cardiovascular mortality in middle aged men by dietary and serum linoleic and polyunsaturated fatty acids. *Arch Intern Med* 2005;165:193-199.

⁴ de Goede J, Geleijnse JM, Boer JM, Kromhout D, Verschuren WM. Linoleic acid intake, plasma cholesterol and 10-year incidence of CHD in 20,000 middle-aged men and women in the Netherlands. *Br J Nutr* 2012;107:1070-6.

connection between plant and animal morphology are fascinating (his time scale not so much). This model certainly affected macrobiotic food choices, even among those who never studied the template that Ohsawa proposed. This evolutionary template places human life at the apex. This is a very common idea and certainly not unique to him. After all man is made in “Gods Image”. It is part of the hierarchy of nature that lays the groundwork for anthropocentric thinking and many of our present day environmental issues. This image of our relationship with nature is outmoded, regressive and goes against all environmental sensibility.

Human life is certainly more complex in structure than most life on the planet but it is also the most destructive. When we imagine that animal life is inferior rather than part of the support system of life on earth we feel free to abuse it. In macrobiotics, the idea that fish have a simpler nervous system and a more primitive structure served as a rationale for consuming them as the “acceptable animal”. They were also one of the most popular animal quality foods in Japanese culture and reflected the eating traditions of our teachers.

Recent research shows that the lack of neural complexity does not demonstrate a lack of sentience.^{5,6} I will return to sentience later. Every year fish stocks are ruined to a devastating degree. Any lack of attention to this is to contribute to a major ecological disaster.⁷

Plants Are Sentient Too: I would be the first to agree that the earth and everything on it is living. That does not mean that everything lives the same. Sentient creatures have a nervous system that allows them to respond. Animals respond and react, plants seem to only react. Even if plants had some form of sentience they would still be appropriate for human food at this time simply because we lack the ability to take water, soil and exposure to sun and create our body's needs.

Everything Is Macrobiotic: I hear this statement often and it is an attitude that runs counter to any ecological concern we might address. It is a simplistic attitude disguised as zen. It is simply relativism, the idea that there is no right

⁵ Animal Cognition, January 2015, Fish intelligence, sentience and ethics, Department of Biological Sciences, Sidney Australia

⁶ Dr. Victoria Braithwaite, "Do Fish Feel Pain?",

⁷ <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/animalsandnature/how-eating-seafood-kills-our-oceans/>

or wrong, good or bad, up or down without a cultural or individual framework. We need to talk about this.

The way that Yin and Yang are used in macrobiotics defies any application of ethics or morality. I agree with that. Using Yin and Yang is a way of talking about objects, actions or ideas in comparison with other objects, actions or ideas. It is a system of measurement. In that sense, there are no values. In terms of Y&Y a hamburger is just a hamburger and a bowl of rice is simply a bowl of rice. It is convenient way of comparing the various aspects of nature. The fact that it is a system that is not concerned with values makes its use difficult when describing the subtleties of human behaviour.

If we really wish to create a healthy world and communicate that message to others we need to communicate values. If a person wants to lower cholesterol, then eliminating fats is a good idea. Yin and yang may come in handy in classification of different fats but the value of staying alive is the issue. Yin and yang cannot describe the value of anything only its characteristics. The classification of foods must be concerned with making choices that lead to health in the individual and society.

Popularity/Acceptance/Exclusivity: We can always find a way to deflect our own resistance by pointing to how many people will not do something. Every radical change in social evolution has required a high degree of commitment to actions that could be seen as dangerous, eccentric or laughable. That process lies at the base of cultural evolution.

We are faced with the same challenge that many of us faced in the 60's when we started eating this way. The food was not available and people thought it was weird or repulsive and even unpatriotic. We persevered regardless and opened a new chapter in the social understanding of food.

The rise of advertised "vegan" and "plant-based" cooking classes in macrobiotic circles means that the social acceptance for these ideas are certainly recognized. I am only hoping that the people giving those classes have made that shift themselves or it would appear dishonest.

When I hear, that people are resistant to eliminating all animal foods from their diet my response is that we are not communicating very well or that our focus is not on best options but on enabling people in their unhealthy habits.

Dietary Rigidity: Dietary rigidity is not being able to change. People who follow the modern diet are the most rigid on the planet. They are totally resistant to trying anything new and addicted to poor quality, environmentally damaging, disease producing junk. That is rigidity I am quite happy to eat with people

who decide to eat differently to me. I never produce any critical observations about their choices. I don't get upset.

It is usually those who eat the modern diet that get upset about someone else eating differently, that is dietary rigidity. I am happy with my choices.

Personal Freedom: Macrobiotics has always put itself forward as a beacon of self-determination and freedom. Freedom is certainly a valuable quality in life. Hopefully that freedom is an expression of the ability to do or not do. Our choices ultimately expose our consciousness (judgement). Where is our true north? If our goal is the creation of a Peaceful World do our actions show the truth of that goal?

Non-Credo is often suggested as a primary guide in macrobiotic thinking. It is an appealing invitation to question beliefs. I agree. That means that the leaning on non-credo as a reason for action gets called into question as well. This particular issue is often a code for "anything goes" and is not part of a serious inquiry. This inquiry would also call intuition into question. I hear macrobiotic people often claim that they are eating some unhealthy food because their intuition told them to. It usually means that they simply didn't know how to interpret a craving and deal productively with it. People all over the world engage in all sorts of unproductive and damaging behaviour because it seemed intuitively right.

IN CLOSING

It is not a coincidence that foods that promote personal health also have economic, social, environmental and even psychological and spiritual advantages. That is what we call Karma. When we view these factors as "side benefits" we miss the point. When personal action is a reflection of natural justice a state of biological integrity is achieved. This is the condition we call health.

The lack of compassion for life other than our own, the lack of appreciation for nature, the fear of change and frantic searches for instant gratification that characterize our society are woven into our food choices. Unravelling them is fundamental to creating a human ecology that can allow us to reach our full human potential. To me that is the essence of macrobiotics and something that our community needs to constantly renew and nourish.

Bill Tara

Galway, Ireland

www.MACROVegan.org

www.billtara.net